

“The Fastest Ship in the Navy”: The Strange Saga of the USS *Reina Mercedes*

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By [Jon Hoppe](#)



The *Reina Mercedes* as she was built for the Spanish Navy, prior to her sinking in 1898. USNI Archives.

On April 29, 1898, *Almirante* (Admiral) Pascual Cervera y Topete of the Spanish Navy steamed out of Cape Verde islands with a fleet of four armored cruisers and three destroyers. His destination: the West Indies, to defend Spain's empire against the American fleet. Hampered by a number of deficiencies, the fleet struggled into the harbor at Santiago de Cuba. Meeting and later joining the squadron there was the *Reina Mercedes*, an unarmored cruiser capable of propulsion under both sail and steam. Built in Cartagena, Spain, in 1887, she had become the station ship at Santiago in 1892. By 1898, she was in such a poor state of repair that her armament was largely removed for use as shore batteries.

Her part in the [Battle of Santiago de Cuba](#) on July 3rd, 1898 (a resounding victory for the U.S. Navy) was little more than to absorb shellfire and to act as an obstruction to navigation. The Spanish had hoped to tow her into the channel and sink her, denying access to the harbor. Even in that, she was not entirely successful; she sank in the shallows, and the channel was left open. "Yet it was not entirely useless,"

Spanish Lieutenant Jose Muller y Tejeiro, second-in-command of the naval forces in Santiago would remark, "since the enemy could not take possession of her, as she is all riddled by bullets which she received that night, and I do not believe she can ever again be used."

But the lieutenant was wrong. Over the course of her seventy-year life, the *Reina Mercedes* would serve not one but two navies, and become a fixture (in more than one sense) at the Naval Academy.



The *Reina Mercedes* sunk in the harbor at Santiago de Cuba, 1899. USNI Archives.

After the hostilities with Spain had ceased, the *Reina Mercedes* was seized by the U.S. Navy with the intention of raising her and turning her into a training ship. She was raised from the bottom in March, 1899 and towed first to Norfolk for repairs, and later to the Portsmouth Navy Yard for refitting. There, she was converted instead into a receiving ship. Rechristened the U.S.S. *Reina Mercedes* in 1905, she was towed to Newport, Rhode Island, replacing the [U.S.S. *Constellation*](#) there for that purpose.



The *Reina Mercedes* in June, 1901, before conversion into a receiving ship. USNI Archives.

Refit again in 1912, she was steamed back to Norfolk for another refit, and this time was sent to Annapolis to replace the U.S.S. *Hartford* (which had been [Admiral Farragut's flagship](#) during the Battle of Mobile Bay) and the elderly U.S.S. *Santee*, a sailing frigate-cum-barracks and training ship that sank at her moorings after a half-century at the Academy.

From 1912 until 1957, with several exceptions when she was towed to Norfolk for overhaul, the *Reina Mercedes* (designated IX-25 in 1920) served continuously as the station ship at Annapolis. For a brief time in 1920, when the Spanish Battleship *Alfonso XIII* called at Annapolis, she flew the flag of Spain as a gesture of goodwill. *Reina Mercedes* soon earned the nickname "the fastest ship in the Navy," owing to her being tied "fast" to her berth at the Naval Academy and rarely ever moving.



The *Reina Mercedes* underway after a refitting. USNI Archives.

For a number of years, the *Reina Mercedes* acted as a sort of brig — though not in the truest sense — for Naval Academy midshipmen. Those punished for serious infractions of the Academy Regulations were confined to the ship for periods of a week to a month or more, attending drills but sleeping in hammocks and taking their meals aboard. This punishment was abolished in 1940, substituted instead for restricting midshipmen to their rooms in Bancroft Hall.

After 1940 the ship was used as living quarters for unmarried enlisted personnel assigned to the Naval Academy, as well as the captain of the ship — who was also the commanding officer of the Naval Station, Severn River Naval Command — and his family. The most famous of these commanders was [William F. "Bull" Halsey](#). Because of this latter arrangement, the *Reina Mercedes* held the unique distinction of being the only ship in the Navy to have ever permit the commanding officer and his dependents living aboard permanently.



The *Reina Mercedes* (left) and the *Cumberland* (IX-8) (right), a converted sailing bark, moored at the Naval Academy, before 1946 when the *Cumberland* was decommissioned. USNI Archives.

The ship was fitted out rather luxuriously during her time at the Academy. One Marine Guard remembered the polished linoleum floors. Coming aboard, he remembered that

“a visitor walks up a gangplank overhung with the inimitable white of Navy canvas. The entrance is flanked by two beautiful carvings made from the original hatches of the *Reina*. Upon reaching the quarterdeck, which was hung with flags and fragments of famous old ships, the visitor turned into the hall. . . . Jutting straight up through the center of the hallway was the mainmast of the ship, to which are attached port and starboard lanterns, affording both light and decorative effect. The main deck held three bedrooms, two baths, the dining room, den, and galley. Perching off the dining room and den were little Spanish balconies. On the next deck were two master bedrooms, bath, dressing room . . . converted into a sewing room and a 40×30 foot lounge. This is the room where much living and all entertaining is done. At the stern end of the immense room was the original steering wheel of the *Reina*. Deck No. 3 was the “penthouse” of the quarters, consisting of a small lounge and sundeck.”



The *Reina Mercedes* at her berth at the Naval Academy during a snowy day, sometime during World War II. Note the SOC “Seagull” floatplanes used for cadet training at right. USNI Archives.

But luxury had to give way to reality. Necessary repairs were estimated to be so costly that the *Reina Mercedes* was ordered to be broken up. She was struck from the Naval Register on September 6, 1957. Decommissioned on November 6th of that year, she was towed to Baltimore and scrapped.

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